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“Zealous Imitation”: The Materiality of the Crusader’s Marked Body

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Abstract

Drawing on textual evidence from across the Latin West and ranging from the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries, this paper explores the practice of crusader body-marking, whereby those who “took the cross” imposed cuts or brand-marks on themselves prior to their departure for the Holy Land. It is argued that these practices should be understood in part as an anxious response to the ephemeral nature of the crusader’s cloth cross, the defining material object associated with the crusades, which was traditionally sewn on to clothing as an indication of the bearer’s temporary commitment to imitate Christ through the medium of holy war.

Further, by focusing in particular on the materiality of permanent body-marking practices, the paper argues that the experience of pain and suffering that was inevitably involved should be understood as an active expression of devotion towards Christ’s body, and thus situated within a broader context of medieval enthusiasm for Christo-mimetic mortification of the flesh.

Keywords

crusades, materiality, body-marking, branding, scarification, sign of the cross, imitation of Christ, mortification of the flesh.

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Biographical note

William Purkis is Reader in Medieval History at the University of Birmingham, UK. He is the author of *Crusading Spirituality in the Holy Land and Iberia, c.1095–c.1187* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2008) and co-editor (with Matthew Gabriele) of *The Charlemagne Legend in Medieval Latin Texts* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2016). He has also published various journal articles and book chapters on aspects of the history of crusading, pilgrimage, and monasticism in the central Middle Ages. From 2015–2017 he was the Principal Investigator on the AHRC Leadership Fellows project “Bearers of the Cross: Material Religion in the Crusading World, 1095–c.1300” (<http://www.bearersofthecross.org.uk>), and in 2017 was the co-curator (with Abigail Cornick) of the *Holy City, Holy War: Devotion to the Sacred in Crusader Jerusalem* exhibition at the Museum of the Order of St. John, London. He is currently completing a book on the devotional ideas and practices of crusaders and other Latin Christians associated with the crusading movement, to be published by Yale University Press.

In the days, weeks and months following Pope Urban II's call to arms at the Council of Clermont on 27 November 1095, Latin Christians from across western Europe began to join the armed Jerusalem pilgrimage that would later become known as the First Crusade. They famously indicated their commitment to the expedition by sewing cloth badges onto their clothes (Figure 1) – an act by which they were understood to have become bearers of the cross (literally, *crucesignati*) in imitation of the example set by Christ himself (Purkis 2008, 30–47). To take the cross in this manner became synonymous with the adoption of the crusade vow in the central and later Middle Ages (Constable 2008, 45–91; Gaposchkin 2017, 65–92), and was certainly what Pope Urban had had in mind when he preached the expedition in 1095–6. But from a very early stage in the history of crusade recruitment, there is evidence for the coincidental emergence of additional and cognate practices of cross-taking. As well as (or perhaps instead of) taking the cloth cross, many crusaders also undertook to brand, paint, or cut signs of the cross onto their bodies. This paper explores the meaning, significance and longevity of these practices of body-marking, arguing that they should be understood as a hitherto under-explored expression of medieval material devotion towards Christ's humanity and bodily sufferings. Owing to the sporadic range of contemporary sources upon which it relies, the paper also seeks to demonstrate the benefits of a trans-chronological comparative approach when examining pre-modern religious practices that were often looked upon with suspicion and disapproval by literate clerical elites.

The Crusader's Marked Body

At the turn of the twelfth century an anonymous monk from the Lido in Venice reflected on the widespread popular enthusiasm for participation in the First Crusade, noting that, in 1096, “the western men, divinely inspired ... briskly and with one mind took to the way of God and

the holy army.” With reference to the crusaders’ distinctive appearance, he remarked that “some were marked on the outside of their clothes with the sign of the cross,” while adding, somewhat matter-of-factly, that “others had it imprinted (*imprimere*) onto their flesh with a white-hot iron” (1895, 255). A similar commentary on the process of crusade recruitment was offered by a contemporary German chronicler, Bernold of Constance, who recalled that although Pope Urban had “made all those who devoted themselves to this journey mark (*notare*) their clothes with the sign of the cross” it was nevertheless striking that “the sign also appeared on the flesh itself of some of them” (1844, 464). Both these testimonies, which point to the prevalence of first crusaders in some way marking their bodies (or having their bodies marked) with the sign of the cross, were independently corroborated in northern France by the monastic historian Baldric of Bourgueil. Towards the beginning of his narrative history of the First Crusade, known as the *Historia Ierosolimitana*, Baldric described how the mood of revivalism that had surrounded the launch of the expedition in 1096 had prompted “certain kinds of poor women ... to apply (*adhibere*) that likeness of a cross with a hot iron” (2014, 12).

White-hot irons do not appear to have been the only means by which certain first crusaders sought to modify their bodies in response to Pope Urban’s preaching, however. In c.1107 another northern French Benedictine monk, Guibert of Nogent, described the variety of ways in which some of his contemporaries – whom he identified as “the most common men and undignified women” – had marked and mutilated themselves prior to the crusade’s departure. One individual was supposed to have cut the sign of the cross into his flesh and exhibited the bloody mark “for all to see”; another had blinded himself in the hope that his neighbors would believe that he was some sort of oracle; and yet another had painted (*pingere*) the sign of the cross onto his body using “the juices of fresh fruits or some other kind of dye” (1996, 330).ⁱ In addition to these generalities, Guibert provided a detailed

account of one particular body-marker, a cleric whom he identified as Abbot Baldwin, whose enthusiasm for the crusade was so feverish that he had “carved (*presculpere*) into the middle of his forehead ... that sign of the cross which was customarily made out of some kind of material and attached to clothing.” Guibert was initially unclear as to how Baldwin had inflicted this mark upon himself, stating that “it did not look to have been painted on, but resembled the kind of wound inflicted by a weapon in battle,” but he later clarified that the abbot had in fact “cut (*scalpere*) his forehead with iron” (1996, 197, 330).

Although acts of body-marking were therefore common enough among first crusaders to leave a significant number of independent evidential footprints, only one other individual who engaged in such practices is known by name. According to Solomon bar Simson’s *Chronicle*, a Hebrew narrative that describes the massacres of Jewish communities during the early stages of the expedition, the crusaders who attacked the Jews of the Rhineland in 1096 were led by Count Emicho of Flonheim, an unscrupulous individual who had supposedly “concocted a tale that an apostle of the crucified one had come to him and made a sign on his flesh” (1977, 28). No further details were offered as to the origins, form or location of this “sign,” but it seems reasonable to assume that it had been self-inflicted and that – like Abbot Baldwin’s cruciform mark – it was positioned prominently, probably on the forehead.

Evidence for crusader body-marking becomes more fragmentary after c.1100, but it is clear that the practice was by no means limited to the period of the First Crusade. Around eighty years after the conquest of Jerusalem in 1099, for example, a collection of miracle stories produced for the cult of St. Frideswide in Oxford recorded the experience of a Welshman named William, who was determined to worship in the Holy Sepulcher and had thus “impressed (*imprimere*) upon himself the sign of the living cross” – perhaps through the imposition of a white-hot iron (Philip the Prior 1853, 570). Similarly, in 1191, a cleric known as Gerald of Wales wrote an account of the preaching tour for the Third Crusade that had

been led through the Welsh countryside by Baldwin, archbishop of Canterbury, three years earlier. Among the colorful tales Gerald told about Baldwin's travels is an account of the difficulties the archbishop and his entourage had faced in April 1188 as they tried to persuade a gang of young men (*iuvenes*) from Anglesey to join the expedition. Although this group of youths had initially rebuffed the preachers' efforts, within a matter of days they had apparently had a change of heart, having been subjected to a violent assault by a band of robbers. At this time they were moved to make a dramatic display of their new-found resolve to become *crucesignati*, and so, as Gerald put it, "although they had previously rejected the cross, they now voluntarily took it in turns to brand it (*affixere*) onto their flesh" (1868, 126).

Various other textual sources indicate that body-marking practices in fact persisted long after the twelfth century. The clerics responsible for the compilation of the Sarum missal, which was in use across medieval England from the late eleventh century onwards, inadvertently provided insights into the prevalence of the body-marking phenomenon through their commentary on the liturgy that it was expected would be observed by those who were preparing to set out for the Holy Land. One version of the text included a strict prohibition against "the branding of a cross upon the flesh of pilgrims going to Jerusalem," stressing that this was an act that had "been forbidden under pain of the greater excommunication" (1913, 170). That it was deemed necessary to institute legislation against body-marking in this way surely demonstrates how pervasive – and how problematic – the Church must have perceived the practice to be. And yet the prohibition was clearly insufficient to stamp it out completely, for body-marking was later portrayed as being part and parcel of the crusader's experience in the early fourteenth-century romance *Sir Isumbras*. As the eponymous hero of this fantastic story made his preparations for departure to the East, he was portrayed as having performed an act of self-mutilation that could have come straight out of one of the narrative histories of

the First Crusade. As the Middle English text succinctly put it, “With his knyfe he share / A crosse on hys sholder bare” (2006, lines 133–4).

Sir Isumbras’s experience of cutting the sign of the cross into his shoulder was clearly not historical, but by the middle of the fifteenth century the widespread practice of body-marking that his imagined experience demonstrates awareness of had actually been incorporated into the normative rituals associated with setting out on crusade – at least in some parts of the Latin West. The registers of Durham Cathedral Priory record the moment in January 1464 when two men from the village of Greatham took vows to fight “against the Turks ... the enemies of the cross of Christ ... for the defence of the Christian faith.” The official ceremonial for embarking on crusade that followed evidently not only involved placing a cloth cross on the crusaders’ clothes, as had been the case since 1095, but also imprinting a brand-mark upon their chests. In this way, the registers recorded, the two crusaders were “successively signed (*signare*) and burned (*adurere*).” This ritualised branding was repeated in Durham some thirty years later, in April 1498, as another would-be crusader from the local parish of Brancepeth made his own preparations to depart for the East as a *crucesignatus*. In both instances, the registers documented that such “signings and burnings” were being performed *ut mos est* – “as is the custom” (*Historiae Dunelmensis* 1839, cccxlix–cccl, cccxc–cccxc). Such formal codification of body-marking into the liturgy may well represent a final attempt on the part of medieval clerical elites to accommodate and control a practice that by the late 1400s crusaders had been observing, although probably in fits and starts, for more than four centuries.

Medieval Responses

How should we interpret the fact that certain crusaders chose to cut, paint or brand signs of the cross onto their bodies – acts that in most cases would have resulted in the creation of

permanent cross-shaped marks on the flesh? The medieval sources do not give us much to go on, as there is very little contemporary commentary about either the practices themselves or their bodily legacies. The anonymous Venetian monk referred to above wrote simply that in 1096 people who had branded themselves were “divinely inspired” (1895, 255), while Baldric of Bourgueil believed that the “poor women” (*mulierculae*) he had heard about were secretly marking themselves and then making cynical claims to being the recipients of miracles (2014, 12; and see Purkis 2005). By way of contrast, the Hebrew chronicler Solomon bar Simson reported confidently that Emicho of Flonheim’s self-inflicted mark was an expression of the count’s apocalyptic ambition, as he sought to fulfil the legend of the Last Emperor (Riley-Smith 1986, 34; Gabriele 2005; Rubenstein 2011, 50–51). Apparently, Emicho was claiming that the sign of the cross had been divinely bestowed upon him “to inform him that when he arrived at Magna Graecia [southern Italy] ... [Christ] himself would appear and place the kingly crown upon his head, and Emicho would vanquish his foes” (Solomon bar Simson 1977, 28). Here, Emicho might conceivably have been drawing inspiration from references in both the Old and New Testaments to similar marks being placed on the foreheads of the righteous (e.g. Exodus 28.36–8; Ezekiel 9.3–4; Revelation 7.3, 9.4, 14.1, 22.4; and see **Figure 2**), but while it is certainly tempting to extend more generally the idea that acts of body-marking might have been fuelled by apocalyptic fervor (cf. Elm 1996) it is striking that none of the Latin sources for the expedition either cited these scriptural verses or referred to millenarian themes to explain the popularity of such practices.

The fullest – and most critical – response to the body-marking phenomenon at the time of the First Crusade was offered by the Benedictine chronicler Guibert of Nogent, who had no sympathy whatsoever with the vast majority of those who had set about marking themselves with the sign of the cross. Like Baldric of Bourgueil, Guibert condemned the body-markers as fraudsters who were claiming that the self-imposed marks had appeared

miraculously to indicate heavenly sponsorship for their participation in the expedition (1996, 330). The only individual to whom Guibert was willing to give the benefit of the doubt was Abbot Baldwin, whom he believed was motivated by a worthy combination of devotional and financial concerns. For Guibert, Baldwin's act of self-mutilation was something approaching a publicity stunt, undertaken to draw attention to himself in a bid to attract the funding necessary to enable him to join the crusade – and it was a strategy that had clearly paid off, for the gifts quickly poured in from local and more distant donors alike. Abbot Baldwin supposedly continued to expose his self-inflicted mark during the expedition itself, since “he had not been silent about his desire for wealth,” although its miraculous origins were eventually called into question when it became apparent that it had become infected (1996, 197). It is perhaps surprising that Guibert was not more scathing of Abbot Baldwin's behavior. For one thing, he did not draw on any appropriate scriptural prohibitions to condemn his fellow-monk, even though Baldwin would seem to have directly contravened the injunction in Leviticus 19.28 that “Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh ... nor print any marks upon you.” Ultimately, Guibert's judgement was tempered by the fact that his subject had proven himself to be a valued source of spiritual guidance on the crusade, especially during the siege of Antioch (October 1097 – June 1098), and he thus reached the sympathetic conclusion that Baldwin “had of course intended zealous imitation of God (*emulatio Dei*), but he had not carried this out wisely” (1996, 197–8).

Although Guibert's association between the act of body-marking and fraudulent bids for crusade funding might plausibly be applied to some of the other would-be crusaders he mentioned, this was not a connection that he made himself and it is therefore difficult to know how far one might make more generalised claims about the crusaders' motivations for cutting, painting or branding themselves from the particular circumstances of Baldwin's case. Nevertheless, in reflecting on Guibert's summary assessment of Baldwin's intentions, it is

worth considering more closely what Guibert might have meant by the phrase *emulatio Dei* – and how far this idea of “zealous imitation” might be understood to explain the choices and actions of his contemporaries in the 1090s, as well as those of later *crucesignati* such as the youths of Anglesey, the fictional Sir Isumbras, and the three crusaders from fifteenth-century Durham.

“Zealous Imitation”

In c.1220 a German Cistercian monk known as Caesarius of Heisterbach looked back some seventy-five years and reflected on a story he had heard about the preaching for the Second Crusade by his Order’s most celebrated abbot, Bernard of Clairvaux. According to Caesarius, at the same time that Bernard was preaching the cross for the Holy Land in 1146 he was also sparking enthusiasm among some members of his audience for abandoning the world completely and joining the Cistercians. One individual, an anonymous canon from the cathedral in Liège, “who was repentant and led inside by the Holy Spirit,” had apparently listened to one of Bernard’s crusade sermons and been deeply moved by what he had heard:

And so he took up the cross, not for that expedition overseas but for the Order, judging it to be better to imprint (*imprimere*) the cross on his mind for a long period than to sew the sign on his clothes for a short time. He had read the words of the Savior: *Whosoever does not take up his cross daily and follow me is not worthy of me*. He did not say for one year or two, but daily.

This story enabled Caesarius to consider in some detail the relative spiritual merits of going on crusade and making a votive commitment to religious profession, and he concluded that crusading was indeed inferior to the monastic vocation for those who wished to pursue Christo-mimetic ideals. The reason for this was simple: while those who chose to imitate Christ by going on crusade only adopted the cloth cross “for a short time,” those who followed his example from within the cloister did so “daily,” and were thus able to fulfil the

instructions that Christ was reported to have given to his disciples in Luke 9.23. Indeed, as Caesarius saw it, “the life of monks, who live according to a Rule, is one complete cross (*tota crux est*), because every part of the body is crucified by obedience” (Caesarius of Heisterbach 2009, 224–8).

Around a decade before Caesarius was writing, the devotional and salvific significance of the cloth cross was also addressed in writing by one of the most influential architects of medieval crusading theory and practice, Pope Innocent III. In a letter that he addressed to Duke Leopold VI of Austria on 24 February 1208, Innocent compared and contrasted the materiality of the crusader’s badge with that of the instrument of punishment and execution that Christ had endured during his Passion. In doing so, Innocent underscored the fact that the cloth cross – and the votive obligation that it symbolised – was far less onerous than anything that Christ had experienced in the first century:

There is yet much more merit in the gibbet of Christ’s cross than in the little sign of your cross: although the glory of the cross is the same, its cost for you and for the Lord is not equivalent. For you accept a soft and gentle cross; he suffered one that was bitter and hard. You bear it superficially on your clothing; he endured his in the reality of his flesh. You sew yours on with linen or silken threads; he was fastened to his with hard, iron nails. (Riley-Smith and Riley-Smith 1981, 90–2)

As Caesarius’s story and Innocent’s letter both indicate, a central theme within medieval crusading discourse was that pain, hardship, and self-inflicted punishment were fundamental to the undertaking of *crucesignati*; and that the sufferings of crusaders were analogous to, and an imitation of, those of Christ himself. Within this ideological framework, the crusader’s cloth cross was thus regarded by contemporaries as “a sign of mortification,” (Ekkehard of Aura 1895, 19) and “a *stigma* of the Lord’s Passion” that was displayed by those who “seemed to have a desire to emulate God” (Guibert of Nogent 1996, 117, 120). The anonymous early-twelfth-century continuator of the chronicle of Frutolf of Michelsberg

provided one of the neatest summaries of the religious ideas with which the crusade badge was encoded when he described the first crusaders as “[an] army of true cross-bearers [who] displayed the sign of the cross on its garments as a reminder of self-mortification” (McCarthy 2013, 147). As these various testimonies demonstrate, the crusaders’ adoption of cross-shaped badges provides a prime example from the Middle Ages of how clothing could, in the words of Cordelia Warr, provide “conduits through which religious vocation and behavior were channelled” (2010, 372; see also Moors 2015, 71–7; and cf. Weetch, this volume). However, as the experience of those medieval crusaders who chose to cut or brand the sign of the cross into their bodies suggests, for some *crucesignati* the functionality of the cloth cross as a “reminder” of Christo-mimetic self-mortification was evidently not wholly satisfactory – perhaps not least because it was a temporary accessory that could be set aside at any time. The variety of practices of body-marking described above might therefore be understood, to borrow from Guibert of Nogent, as a form of “zealous imitation,” through which certain crusaders demonstrated their willingness to go beyond what Pope Urban II (and many of his successors) had demanded of them when they were instructed to “take the cross” as an expression of their devotion to Christ’s human suffering.

Two features of the body-marking experience should be stressed in order to underscore how these practices might be interpreted as literalistic and “zealous” responses to ideals of *imitatio Christi*. The first of these relates to the nature of the mark itself, since the cross-shaped scars that would inevitably have resulted from acts of cutting and branding would, of course, have been permanent, and would thus have enabled marked crusaders to claim legitimately that they carried Christ’s cross “daily.” In this respect, it is telling that the marks themselves were often recorded as being located in places that would have been discernible to others, such as the middle of the forehead (cf. Gustafson 2000, 25). Similarly ostentatious displays were made by crusaders elsewhere, and in related contexts; at the time

of recruitment for the Fourth Crusade, for example, the Venetian doge Enrico Dandolo had apparently made a particular point of having his cloth cross “sewn on to a large cotton cap for him ... because he wanted people to be able to see it” (Villehardouin 1938–9, vol. 1, 68; Smith 2008, 20; and see [Figure 3](#)). The evidence considered above certainly suggests that in some cases the practice of body-marking constituted a form of devotional exhibitionism, with certain crusaders seeking to announce their commitment to Christo-mimetic ideals by imposing cross-shaped marks upon themselves in ways that were clearly visible to their contemporaries. Such unusual and distinctive modifications to the crusader’s appearance might therefore have been designed to serve as “a marker of difference, an index of inclusion and exclusion” (Caplan 2000, xiv), distinguishing the bearer from his or her co-religionists and, indeed, from members of the various other faith communities with whom they came into contact, in much the same way that tattoos and other forms of permanent body-mark have been used in numerous other historical and contemporary settings. Across the ancient Mediterranean world, for example, tattoos were frequently imposed upon the foreheads of criminals or slaves “to inscribe the violence of punishment or possession” (Burrus 2003, 404; Jones 2000; Lewy 2014, 60–62), and it has been argued with reference to the practice of punitive tattooing in the Roman empire that the forcibly-marked body was intended “[to] function as a permanently running advertisement of ... guilt and subjugation” (Gustafson 2000, 24). Such punishments were in fact often appropriated and subverted by early Christians (Elm 1996; Gustafson 2000, 29–31; Burrus 2003, 404–406), who were believed to have worn their *stigmata* with pride in fulfilment of Galatians 6.17 (“From henceforth let no man be troublesome to me: for I bear the marks of the Lord Jesus in my body”); indeed, in Late Antiquity, similar marks were sometimes imposed upon “pagan” statues in targeted acts of confessional vandalism (Elm 1996, 436; Brown 2013, 149; Fluck, Helmecke, and O’Connell 2015, 96; [Figure 4](#)). Taking all this into consideration, and bearing in mind that, as

Brent Plate has put it, “the skin is media ... and it is this fleshy screen that marks our identity” (2012, 164), it is therefore plausible that the crusader’s scarred or branded body was intended to function as a “permanently running advertisement” of his or her devotional priorities – and, specifically, as a way of proclaiming a Christian identity and asserting a “zeal” for ideals of *imitatio Christi*.

But this analysis could be pushed out further still by considering a second aspect of the experience of body-marking and, in particular, paying closer attention to the materiality of the practice itself; in other words, to respond to a recent call for scholars “to think through the seemingly mundane dimensions of religions” (Plate 2012, 162). The practicalities of body-marking are not something that are considered at any length in any of the medieval sources, none of which (so far as we know) were composed by individuals who had experienced these marks for themselves. It should, nevertheless, be borne in mind that all of the various practices of permanent body-marking described above would have caused intense physical distress; and all would inevitably have involved the shedding of blood. In this respect, it is instructive to cite an autobiographical postscript to one of the few scholarly studies of medieval evidence for tattooing, in which the author recalls her own experience of having a permanent mark imprinted on her body, and stresses in particular the physical sensations that the act provoked. “The stigma is received in suffering,” she writes, “... alerting me to pain’s exquisite variety (reverberating differently through muscle, bone, softer tissue) ... Pain eventually withdraws, but not without leaving its trace” (Burrus 2003, 413–414).

Given the prominent emphasis that was placed in crusade preaching from 1095 onwards on the importance of taking the cloth cross in imitation of Christ, it is perhaps not surprising that some crusaders took these ideas further by using their own bodies as sites for a more traumatic and permanent expression of devotion to the pain and suffering of his Passion

(cf. Elm 1996, 435–437; Ousterhout 2015, 104). Indeed, one source hints that in the mid-1090s Urban II himself may even have been aware of the need to temper his audience’s eagerness in this regard; in c.1135 the chronicler Orderic Vitalis characterised the pope as “a wise and kind physician” because he had instructed that the hardships of the expedition were likely to be so great that the crusaders were excused “from any obligation to fast or mortify the flesh in other ways” (Orderic Vitalis 1975, 16–19). Clearly, not all of those who responded to Urban’s call to crusade heard or chose to heed these instructions, opting not just to bear the cross “superficially on [the] clothing” (as Innocent III would later put it) but, rather, and like Christ, to “endure it in the reality of [the] flesh.”

When the practice of crusader body-marking is approached in this way, close analogues can in fact be found in various other times and places across the medieval West. The case that is perhaps most reminiscent of the crusaders’ experience is that of St. Radegund (c.520–87), whose *Vita* was composed by Venantius Fortunatus in the late sixth century. Venantius described the Merovingian queen, nun and saint as having inflicted various ascetic punishments on herself during her lifetime, “so that she might be a martyr though it was not an age of persecution,” but among the most creative – and pre-meditated – devotional acts that he recounted was Radegund’s decision to brand her flesh with the sign of the cross. Venantius’s account of this episode is useful for thinking with when reflecting on the materiality of the crusaders’ punitive body-marking practices, since it not only emphasised the careful preparation involved but also stressed the pain that Radegund experienced and attempted to find meaning in her agonizing mortification of the flesh:

She ordered a brass plate made, shaped in the sign of Christ [i.e. the cross]. She heated it up in her cell and pressed it upon her body most deeply in two spots so that her flesh was roasted through. Thus, with her spirit flaming, she caused her very limbs to burn ... To cool her fervent soul, she thought to burn her body. She imposed the glowing brass and her burning limbs hissed. Her skin was consumed and a deep furrow remained where the brand had touched her

... Thus did a woman willingly suffer such bitterness for the sweetness of Christ. (McNamara, Halborg, and Whatley 1992, 81; and see also Brown 2013, 228–31)

Venantius Fortunatus's graphic account of St. Radegund's enthusiasm for embracing physical pain "for the sweetness of Christ" through the wilful imposition of a white-hot cross-shaped brand upon her body offers a close match to many of the descriptions of crusader body-marking discussed above, and suggests that these particular practices of branding and cutting might be fruitfully understood within a broader context of behavior that could loosely be categorised as devotional self-harm. Scholars of medieval Latin Christianity are certainly familiar with many of these forms of religious expression, which included fasting, flagellation, self-stigmatism and occasionally even attempts at auto-crucifixion (Constable 1995, 194–217), but the experience of the crusaders has generally been overlooked, perhaps not least because of the sporadic nature of the evidence (cf. Caplan 2000, xxiii). That said, the sources considered above might well be just the tip of an iceberg, and the full extent of the practice of body-marking among crusaders may become clearer as increasing numbers of references to the phenomenon are identified and collated. In the meantime, it is clear that the imposition of permanent marks of the cross upon the bodies of some crusaders was by no means limited in its geographical or chronological scope, with documented cases being reported in France, Germany, Italy, Wales, and England from the eleventh through to the fifteenth centuries. In this respect, the surviving evidence for a multiplicity of practices of body-marking demonstrates how positively some medieval people responded to the discourse of Christo-mimetic pain and suffering that surrounded the act of becoming a *crucesignatus*.

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Figures

Figure 1. The preparation and imposition of cloth crosses, from a fifteenth-century manuscript of Robert the Monk's *Historia Iherosolimitana*: St. Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. Sang. 658, p. 25.

Figure 2. A twelfth-century enamel plaque (London, British Museum, 1888,1110.4) that illustrates how Ezekiel 9.3–4 might be visualised for medieval viewers. “The man that was clothed with linen” is depicted on the right, following the Lord’s instruction that he should “Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem: and mark Thau upon the foreheads of the men that sigh.” © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Figure 3. Obverse of a billon denier from the principality of Antioch (London, Museum of the Order of St. John, LDOSJ ANT94), one of the four Latin lordships established in the Near East in the wake of the First Crusade, showing Bohemond III (1163–1261) wearing a mail coif and a helmet emblazoned with the sign of the cross. © Museum of the Order of St. John and the University of Birmingham.

Figure 4. A first-century portrait bust of Germanicus Caesar (London, British Museum, 1872,0605.1) that has been deliberately defaced through the carving of a cross into the forehead, probably at some point in Late Antiquity, to confer the emperor with an anachronistic Christian identity. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

ⁱ This observation has often been interpreted as providing evidence for the production of medieval tattoos, possibly similar to those bodily souvenirs of the holy city that were sought after by later generations of Jerusalem pilgrims (Lewy 2014; Ousterhout 2015). It is by no means clear, however, that the practice Guibert was describing involved puncturing the skin with a needle and inserting pigment or ink into the resulting mark. Although Guibert referred to the crusaders' skin as being "painted," he compared the practice with the application of make-up, which suggests a temporary modification rather than a permanent one.